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Timor:

The Balibo Incident in Perspective

By

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To Angela
To one who cares!
Jim Dunn

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The International Setting

A paper given by James Dunn, Foreign Affairs Columnist,
on the twentieth anniversary, October 16, 1995

James Dunn has been an Australian specialist on foreign affairs for some four decades. He first worked as a defence analyst, specialising in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, and then became a diplomat, serving as Australian Consul in Portuguese Timor in the early sixties. After a period as West European Desk Officer he was posted to Paris, and later to the Soviet Union. For more than 12 years before he took early retirement, he was senior foreign affairs adviser to the Australian Federal Parliament. During that time he also became an adviser to parliamentarians on international human rights.

In 1974 he was sent by the Whitlam Government on a fact-finding mission to East Timor, when Portugal announced that the Timorese would be allowed to determine their own future. He wrote for the Parliament a lengthy report on the options facing the Timorese people. Late in 1975, when Indonesian military intervention began, he led a humanitarian aid mission to East Timor. Later he wrote a report on the humanitarian consequences of Indonesia's invasion. In 1983 he wrote a major study of the problem, entitled Timor: A People Betrayed. He is also a specialist on the issue of genocide and is a co-author of three books on the subject.

James Dunn has served as President of the Human Rights Council of Australia, and President of the Canberra Branch of the Australian Institute for International Affairs (the Australian equivalent of Chatham House). He was Co-President of the Second World Congress on Human Rights, and is currently a member of a national consultative committee on human rights. He also writes as a regular foreign affairs columnist, frequently writing on UN and peace-keeping issues.

The Parliamentary Human Rights Group was founded in 1976 as an independent forum in the British Parliament concerned with the defence of international human rights. Since 1976, it has grown to a membership of 130 Parliamentarians from both Houses and all political parties. It undertakes human rights missions, publishes discussion papers, receives visitors, and engages in dialogue with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

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- to increase awareness in Parliament, and in Britain and abroad generally, of human rights abuses whenever they occur
- to communicate to governments, their representatives in the UK and visiting delegations, concerns about human rights violations
- to work for the implementation by all governments of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and of the UN Covenants on civil and political, and on economic social and cultural rights

Twenty years ago Indonesian troops invaded the remote colony of East Timor and some months later proclaimed it Indonesia's 27th province. For the people of this territory, which occupies the eastern half of the island of Timor, with an area slightly smaller than that of Wales, the invasion began a nightmare of death and destruction lasting several years. It was a tragic end to the decolonisation process initiated by the Portuguese in the year following the April coup of 1974. That coup had toppled the Salazarist corporate state, the last of Europe's great colonial powers, and precipitated immediate moves to allow the various components of Portugal's rambling empire to become independent states.

For East Timor, however, the radical change in Lisbon did not lead to independence. A key event in the unfolding drama in 1975 was the killing of two television crews from Australia, an incident that occurred in the earliest phase of Indonesia's military intervention. As in the case of the annexation that was to follow, the killing of these men, almost two decades later is very much a matter of unfinished business. Indeed, despite the essential gravity of this contravention of the United Nations Charter, in these past twenty years because of insufficient international attention, and not lack of evidence, those responsible for these human rights violations have not been publicly identified, and officially no responsibility has been accepted.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Balibo, the aim in this paper is to present an account of the way these newsmen lost their lives, and of the political and military circumstances surrounding the incident. I also propose to give some attention to the implications of the Balibo affair for the course of the Timor saga as a whole. For example, no other issue more clearly exposes the readiness of Australian governments to accommodate Indonesia's aggressive intentions towards East Timor. It also offers important lessons in a wider context, in relation to the role of the media in covering events on the ground in the trouble spots of our still unsettled world, in particular the right of those who seek the truth to the best possible protection, no matter how inconvenient or ugly that truth might be.

The East Timor Situation in its International Context

It is necessary to preface this account with a general outline of the unfolding of Indonesia's moves to undermine East Timor's decolonisation by military means, a looming crisis that attracted little international attention. Given the nature of the interplay of power politics the reasons for the poor response to this act of aggression are not hard to find. In the mid-seventies, when the invasion occurred, East Timor was a remote and little-known place, and world attention was then absorbed with Cold War issues. This was especially the case in Southeast Asia, where US forces were still nursing the psychological wounds inflicted by their hasty and ignominious withdrawal from Vietnam. Americans were not only distracted by Vietnam; their confidence was also still reeling from the political shocks of the Watergate scandal. Their European allies, on the other hand, were engrossed in the development of the European Community, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the quest for a more secure format for Europe as a whole, via the Helsinki Accords negotiations. In the circumstances of the time, among the major players on the international stage the strategic implications of the invasion were perceived to be minimal.

In Western perceptions the Suharto regime was regarded as friendly, and its motives for seizing the tiny colony of East Timor made good sense to strategists in Washington, London and Canberra, where the proliferation of small states in the last phase of decolonisation of the great European empires was being regarded with some concern and scepticism. Moreover, there was nothing unprecedented about the notion of integration in a world in which millions of East Europeans were held in a captive nation status that at the time was widely regarded as being virtually irreversible.

The North Vietnamese victory enhanced the strategic importance of Indonesia, the largest nation in Southeast Asia, and to most officials in Washington and Canberra, one of the most vulnerable. The sprawling archipelago straddles the division between what were in the mid-seventies, the strategically important Indian and Pacific Oceans. Since independence the Indonesian state had more than once appeared to be at risk of disintegration, in the face of rebellions based on religious or separatist grounds. In 1977 Indonesia's strategic significance in Washington's eyes was stressed to the writer by the then US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, Richard Holbrooke. As Holbrooke put it; *"Indonesia forms the division between the strategically important Indian and Pacific Oceans; the*

Suharto regime is the best of possible alternatives, and there is nothing the US will do to destabilise it." If to the Indonesian military the risk of national disintegration had become an obsession, to governments in Washington and Canberra the preservation of Indonesia's national integrity had become strategically desirable. A more recent view of the problem was given, in retrospect, by Dr Kissinger in July this year. When questioned by Alan Nairn about his prior knowledge of the invasion, he replied: *"It seemed to us to be an anti-colonial problem in which the Indonesians were taking over Timor and we had absolutely no reason at that time to pay any huge attention to it.*

Clearly, when the Timorese were struggling to establish a post-colonial identity, the colony occupied an insignificant place in the order of global priorities. In post-Salazarist Portugal, East Timor had lost any importance it might once have had, for a new generation of politicians were now turning their back on their colonial past, and concentrating their political attentions on a promising future as part of the European Community. Moreover, for much of 1975 Portugal was in the grip of political crises.

The United Nations carried a clear responsibility in relation to decolonisation, but when the Timor crisis was looming the world body was still in the state of partial paralysis imposed on it by Cold War political divisions. While decolonisation remained a sensitive issue, as Kissinger had observed, to many in the corridors of international power the position of East Timor more closely resembled that of Goa, whose earlier seizure by India was widely acclaimed in the Third World as an act of decolonisation.

Australia was regarded as a key actor by all the parties involved, and indeed was arguably placed in a strong position to change the course of events, but in Canberra's assessment East Timor no longer enjoyed a strategically important position. That had ended in the early sixties, before Whitlam. Most politicians had suffered a memory loss about the huge sacrifices inflicted on the Timorese people by Australia's military intervention in 1942. That episode had little impact on the consciences of the pragmatically-disposed policy-makers. To the leaders of the major Australian political parties, interest in the Portuguese colony had been totally eclipsed by the developing relationship with Indonesia, and by the latter's growing economic and political importance. Another distraction as the situation in Timor began to deteriorate in the second half of 1975 was a mounting domestic crisis in Australia that was to culminate in the dismissal of the Whitlam Government by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, on 11 November.

Indonesia was, however, to remain a central concern in a strategic sense, and thanks to a sophisticated intelligence monitoring service, the Australian Government in fact knew more about military preparations to seize East Timor by armed force than did any other government. But this knowledge did not produce policy changes. Canberra's responses to Jakarta's designs continued to be subjectively determined by considerations more to do with the new importance of Suharto's anti-communist regime than with upholding international law.[1] In no other incident was this subjectivity more apparent that the case of the killing of the newsmen at Balibo in 1975.

In effect, therefore, in October 1975, when the East Timorese were faced with an impending invasion, the only government with a close interest in their future was in fact the Suharto regime. While Jakarta's response, as given by the then Foreign Minister, Adam Malik (who at first welcomed the possible emergence of an independent state of East Timor), initially seemed magnanimous, it was not shared by a group of generals with greater influence in the Presidential Palace, who in late 1974 began moves to bring about the integration of the colony by stealth, and if necessary by force.

The Path to Military Intervention

It was against a background of international disinterest, meddling by Indonesian intelligence agents and a paralysing political crisis in Portugal that an armed conflict broke out between Fretilin and UDT in August 1975. This civil war (as it is usually referred to) was not the inevitable result of a breakdown in relations between the two main Timorese political parties (who between them enjoyed

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[1]. It should be noted, nevertheless, that under the UKUSA arrangements that had existed since 1948 this intelligence material was passed on to Washington and London.

the support of more than 90% of the population). It was engineered, as a deliberate strategy, by the Indonesian generals in charge of a covert intelligence operation, designated *Operasi Komodo*, which had been in existence since late 1974. The aim of its architects, who included General Ali Murtopo, General Benny Murdani and intelligence chief, General Yoga Sugama, was to bring about the integration of the Portuguese colony by whatever means necessary. It was these same generals who were largely responsible for the civil war. Only a matter of days before the attempted UDT coup in Dili the party's leaders, whose more conservative policies were preferred by Jakarta, were flown to the Indonesian capital. There General Murtopo informed them that Fretilin (the party of the left) was in their view a Communist party. Indonesian intelligence had obtained information, they were told, that Fretilin was about to launch a coup, and that North Vietnamese officers were secretly training a left-wing military force. These allegations were pure fabrications but, in the turbulent political conditions of the time, the UDT leaders felt obliged to heed them.

In fact the UDT coup failed, and within three weeks its rag-tag military force had been overwhelmed by Fretilin forces (most of the Timorese troops in the local military were actually Fretilin supporters) and had been forced to retreat to a small enclave at Batugade, just over the border from Indonesian Timor.[2] To the Indonesians this stunning reversal was alarming, and raised fears that a Fretilin-controlled East Timor would win international recognition. It was imperative, therefore, that the left-wing victory should not remain unchallenged. The operation, in which the military assault on Balibo was only one part, was designed to create the impression that a rejuvenated UDT force was successfully counter-attacking from the west, thus heading off any claim by Fretilin that it was in total control of the territory. Even before the military intervention steps were taken to create this impression. Hence, in the weeks before the Balibo attack Indonesia's government-owned *Antara* newsagency regularly reported continuing resistance by UDT forces in many parts of the colony. the success of the "counter-attack". [3]

With little outside interest, the Indonesian press reports managed to gain a credibility they hardly deserved. Australian media representation in Timor was sporadic and thin on the ground, and the main news outlets tended to carry the *Antara* reports, usually without any qualification. These reports were evidently designed not only to create the impression that East Timor was in a chaotic situation with a civil war continuing to rage, but that the situation was placing impossible pressure on Indonesia. However, of the few journalists who did venture to the territory at that time most soon realised that a sophisticated disinformation operation was under way, and did their best to expose Jakarta's creeping intervention. Australian journalists reported the first military intrusion: in September 1975 a small Indonesian force had crossed into East Timor, in an apparent attempt to make contact with supporters of the small pro-integration party, Apodeti, in the Atsabe area.

It was against the background of conflicting reports about the situation in Timor that the two ill-fated television teams went to the Portuguese colony in October 1975. Reports from Fretilin leaders that Indonesian forces had conducted a major assault over the border into the village of Batugade on 6 October 1975 aroused concern in Australia. Media interest was also provoked by the stand of the Whitlam Government which, although it provided humanitarian aid during the civil war, appeared to be unconcerned at the prospect of Indonesian military intervention. Indeed the Government was not keen for the press to go to East Timor, the Defence Minister of the time, Mr Bill Morrison, having reportedly secretly ordered Naval and Air Force commanders in Darwin to prevent people going to the colony by air or sea. [4]

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[2]. Later in September they were dislodged from Batugade, and force to flee into Indonesian Timor. This conflict, though brief in duration, involved some bitter fighting in which some 1,500 Timorese lost their lives.

[3]According to Jose Martins who operated as a Bakin agent, and was later interviewed by the author, Antara played a key role in *Operasi Komodo*.

[4]. As reported by Hamish Macdonald in *Death at Balibo* in *National Times*, 7 July 1979.

The Media Involvement.

The role of the Australian media in the unfolding of the Timor saga had been very mixed. Between the early sixties and 1974 the media maintained a weather-eye interest in happenings in the territory, mostly based on speculation that Indonesia would move to seize the territory, after the Sukarno Government had secured West Irian from the Dutch. This speculation, it should be added, the Indonesian authorities always took steps to discourage at that time, insisting that Indonesia had no interest in the Portuguese colony and that its future should be decided by the people themselves. By and large the media took more seriously than diplomats the notion that Australia had incurred some kind of debt to the Timorese, when our troops violated Portuguese sovereignty shortly after the Pacific War.

It would, however, be stretching the point to say that local media interest in the colony was significantly stronger than that of the political establishment, for only a relatively small section of the media maintained a close interest in events in 1974 and 75. Most were probably less motivated by notions of national obligation than by an instinctive concern at Indonesian intentions, and a suspicion of the Whitlam Government's policy, the real thrust of which was being kept under wraps. In short the Government was hiding something, and such behaviour is the stuff the media's pursuit of news is made of. However, most Australian journalists do have an instinctive sympathy for the rights of the little fellow, and in the international scene that was precisely the position of the Timorese. There was an acknowledgement that if Australia did not support them, nobody would. Finally, the Timorese won many supporters with their natural openness, unpretentiousness and their genuine affection for Australians.

However, the Timorese right to self-determination did not enjoy the unqualified support of the media. There was strong support among the more senior, and more conservative, journalists for the so-called pragmatic policies espoused by the Whitlam Government. The Indonesian relationship, these would argue, was too important to let concerns about the rights of the Timorese, who were too poor to stand on their own, get in the way. Some shared with key officials of the Whitlam Government the view that integration with Indonesia was a step up from Portuguese colonial rule, which was the subject of especial ridicule to those who regarded economic development as the litmus test of colonial achievement.

Then there was the issue of left-wing influence among Fretilin, and the prospect, mooted by some Indonesians, of East Timor becoming a Southeast Asian Cuba. While no respectable journalist supported such a scenario, some Asian specialists were understanding of the paranoid attitudes manifested by the Indonesian military. There was also an element of fatalism about East Timor's future. In short, the Indonesian generals were determined to move against the colony and no one was going to stop them. It was a reality and we had to live with it. Such a pragmatic view was expressed to the author by the late Peter Hastings, then Foreign Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald,* and one of the Australian media's most respected writers on Asian affairs.[5] Thanks to a weak media coverage of events in Timor, to the flow of disinformation emanating from Jakarta, and to the stand taken by Whitlam Government officials dealing with East Timor, few journalists who ventured to the colony were well-informed about the situation, and especially about the nature of Indonesia's involvement. A notable exception was Jill Jolliffe, whose career as an international journalist was launched during several months in East Timor, most of the time during the Fretilin interregnum. She was to become the media's most skilled interpreter of the situation prior to the Indonesian invasion of Dili in December 1975.

As it happened the most sensational case of media involvement in the dramatic events of 1975 was that of the five newsmen who, having witnessed at Balibo, the first major assault by Indonesian forces, were to pay with their lives. While the group have been commonly referred to as the 'Australian

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5. Although Hastings was later accused of being an apologist for the annexation, he in fact played a leading positive role in the early stages of the affair, in particular in reporting the real intentions of both the Indonesian military and of the Whitlam Government.

newsmen', this description is only partly accurate. Although they were employed by Australian companies only two members of the group were actually Australian citizens, two being British and one a New Zealander. Also the presence of the five was coincidental, for they were actually two separate television crews. One was from HSV7 in Melbourne. It comprised Greg Shackleton, 29, a television reporter, who apparently persuaded his news director, John Maher, to give him the assignment, Gary Cunningham, 27, a New Zealand cameraman (who had had some war experience in Vietnam) and Tony Stewart, 21, a sound recordist. The others were from the rival Nine Network in Sydney, and their presence reflected the interest of Gerald Stone, TCN-9's news director, in what was happening in East Timor (which he himself had visited in the previous August). For the team Stone chose Malcolm Rennie, 28, a reporter with the Nine Network in Melbourne. Rennie was an experienced Englishman who had been with the network for a year, and had gained the reputation of being a sharp reporter. Another British subject, Brian Peters, 29, was chosen as cameraman. He was experienced and well-travelled.

Gerald Stone's idea was his team should get proof of Indonesian involvement, but according to the Hamish Macdonald account he instructed them to take no risks and not to wear uniforms. The two crews arrived separately by air at Dili; Shackleton and the HSV-7 party on the morning of 10 October, and Rennie and Peters two days later. Both teams spent little time in the capital before heading for the border, and they spent most of the intervening days in the Maliana-Balibo area,[6] where they took some film and conducted a number of interviews.

The Balibo Operation

Let us now turn to the Indonesian military assault on Balibo. Statements by Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Adam Malik, in September 1975 suggest that he might have been ignorant that moves by ABRI (Angkatan Bersenjata Indonesia - Indonesian Armed Forces) to destroy Fretilin were about to begin. However, the same cannot be said of State Department and Defence officials in far-away Washington. A CIA brief on 11 October 1975 makes it clear that the US government, and presumably the Australian government as well, had several days' warning that the Indonesians were about to launch a major assault against East Timor. The brief reported that the Indonesian President had approved a "plan of action that will increase military pressure on Fretilin forces operating near the border". This plan involved the setting up of enclaves inside East Timor.

The brief then predicted the attack that was, among other things, to lead to the fatal events at Balibo. It reported: "*The first of the enclaves is to be established on October 14 when Indonesian units are to attack the town of Maliana. The troops participating in the operation will wear uniforms without insignia and are to carry older, Soviet-made weapons so as not to be identified as Indonesian regulars.*"[7] And presumably in order to avoid criticism for using US weapons! The US intelligence analysts were out by two days in their prediction of the timing of the Indonesian attack, but their assessment was otherwise fairly accurate. Although the town of Balibo has usually been linked with the attack on 16 October, the main objective was in fact the more important regional centre of Maliana. Balibo was to become the focus of world attention because some foreign newsmen were killed there; but in fact, the town was only one objective in a much wider operation.

The mid-October assault against Fretilin came as no surprise to the Timorese military leaders, who had been anticipating further Indonesian military action after the Batugade attack on 6 October. It nevertheless aroused great apprehension and concern. On the evening of 16 October a group of Australians in Dili (including the author, whose aid team had not long arrived in Timor) were urgently requested to go to the central communications office, known as the Marconi Centre, where Vice-President Nicolau Lobato told us that a 'massive attack' had been launched by Indonesian troops on a wide front, extending from Lebos to Balibo. The Balibo post had been under naval and artillery bombardment and, at that time, Lobato could tell us nothing about the fate of the five Australian and

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[6] Maliana is a main regional centre to the east of Balibo.

[7] Van Atta and Toohey: The Timor Papers, Part 2, National Times, 6-12 June, 1982.

three Portuguese newsmen who were known to be in the vicinity of the village. In the event, the Portuguese party, who had pulled out of Balibo on the eve of the attack (after having failed to persuade the Australians to withdraw with them), turned up in Dili some days later, after a harrowing trek across the intervening mountainous terrain.

The attack of 16 October was hardly a 'massive' assault when compared with, for example, major battles in the Vietnam War, but from the Timorese point of view it was a spectacular and frightening operation. From the middle of September onwards hundreds of troops, many of them from crack regiments, had been moved into West Timor, mostly through the small port of Atapupu. Overall command of this military phase of *Operasi Komodo* was the ultimate responsibility of Major-General Leonardus Benyamin (Benny) Murdani. Murdani, a graduate of a US military training college, was one of the generals closest to President Suharto. A paratroop commando (RPKAD - renamed Kopassandha, and later Kopassus) officer, he was not without experience in operations similar to the one about to be launched against East Timor. He had commanded a small paratroop unit which was dropped behind Dutch lines in West New Guinea in 1962, when *Operasi Tjendrawasih* was being mounted against Netherlands forces. General Murdani also played a major part in the military confrontation of Malaysia in the early 1960s. By August 1975 he was Indonesia's leading hawk, at one stage reportedly causing Suharto to remark: "If you listen to Benny you'll be in a war every day". [8] In the early stage of the Timor campaign, Murdani was assisted by Brigadier-General Pranoto, the commander of the *Udayana* military district command (Kodam), Colonel Sugiyanto (who dealt with the Timorese UDT and Apodeti leaders), and four other colonels - Sinaga, from the intelligence staff, Kasenda from the Navy, Agus Hernoto, and not least Dading Kalbuadi, who was the field commander of the October assault on Maliana and Balibo, and was to become the military occupation commander in Timor.

On the eve of the attack, Murdani had at his disposal some 3500 troops in the border area - 2000 of whom were used by Dading, together with a handful of aircraft and helicopters. Behind the scenes the Indonesians dispensed with the propaganda claim that this operation was a UDT affair. Most UDT leaders were nationalists with little interest in integration. With the exception of a handful of members whom the Indonesians trusted, they were ordered back into West Timor where they were unceremoniously consigned to a refugee camp. One immediate reason for this action was that some of the UDT leaders, including João Carrascalao, had begun to complain about the harsh Indonesian military behaviour, and about the wanton killing of Timorese civilians. But it must have already been clear to the Indonesians that few of the Timorese in the so-called "Anti-Communist Movement", which had been set up to provide an ideological counter to Fretilin, had any real enthusiasm for integration.

Henceforth, the key Timorese leaders in the pro-Indonesian camp were Lopes da Cruz, who handled political matters, Tomas Goncalves, who acquired the title of military commander, Mario Carrascalao (João's brother) and Jose Martins, who, until his defection early in 1976, dealt with public relations. Few Timorese participated in the Maliana operation, however, and those who did were confined to non-combatant, subordinate roles. These Timorese had not in fact taken part in the civil war, most of them having been drawn from a group who had been taken from the Atsabe district to a military training centre in West Timor earlier in the year, months before UDT's coup.

In the operation itself the Indonesian troops were accompanied by some French Panhard armoured vehicles and a few Russian light tanks. In the attack on Balibo their main support was light artillery and rocket fire, and covering bombardment from a frigate, almost certainly the *Monginsidi*. Despite this support, the Indonesian forces were soon to find the going difficult, especially in the south where the rugged terrain favoured the defenders and where the troops did not have the luxury of covering fire from the navy. Also, the Falintil soon demonstrated its skill as a guerrilla army in the rugged terrain. At Lebos to the south and near Bobonaro Fretilin troops held the Indonesian advance. In one of these engagements the Timorese counter-attacked so vigorously that an Indonesian company fled in disorder, leaving much of its weaponry behind. Although Maliana quickly fell to the Indonesians, subsequent Fretilin counterattacks almost forced the invaders to abandon the town.

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[8] David Jenkins, *A Guard against Change*, Far Eastern Economic Review, 21 April 1983.

The nature of the operation and the stiff Timorese resistance it encountered was confirmed by the CIA in its briefs to the US government, some of which were subsequently leaked. These intelligence briefs indicate that from the very outset Washington was well aware that Jakarta's military moves to bring about integration were going to be bitterly contested. Thus, on 18 October, only two days after the attack on Balibo, a US intelligence bulletin noted that Indonesian forces had become "*bogged down in some areas after three days of fighting* ". Fretilin forces, it reported, were *'putting up stiff resistance in places. ..... One Indonesian unit is apparently surrounded and taking casualties'.* Two days later another intelligence bulletin reported that, although there had been some gains, the Indonesian drive into East Timor had '*stalled because of Jakarta's failure to secure the border town of Lebos*'. On 24 October, more than a week after the assault began, the situation was no better, according to the CIA": *'The Indonesian military operation launched last week in Portuguese Timor has bogged down. Field commanders apparently under-estimated their logistic problems and the strength of Fretilin forces operating near the border*'. Fretilin counterattacks, it was noted, had forced some Indonesian units '*to withdraw to their side of the border'.* [9]

Although the attack on Balibo became the centre of international attention, creating a potentially serious problem for Indonesia, especially in its relations with Australia, that particular sector of the frontal assault on 16 October was in fact only lightly defended and briefly contested by Timorese troops. It was the sector most exposed to naval and artillery bombardment, and the Fretilin military commanders therefore quickly resolved not to attempt to hold what they considered a virtually indefensible position. But, because of its significance as one of the most controversial events of the Timor affair, let us take a closer look at just what happened at Balibo.

The Indonesian assault in that sector involved about 300 troops, who were under the command of a major, believed to be Major Andreas or Junus. The attack began at about 4.00 am, and at near 7.00 am the force entered the village square. The Fretilin opposition consisted of about 40 troops equipped with one machine gun and small arms. Outnumbered and outgunned, they began to withdraw as soon as the invading troops entered the village, firing as they retreated. Left in Balibo were the five newsmen from Australia, who had decided to remain in the village, presumably confident that their non-combatant status would be identified and respected by the other party to the conflict.

It is quite apparent that the newsmen realised that they were taking risks, but Indonesia was, after all, Australia's nearest neighbour, and a great deal had been said in the previous two years about the 'close and friendly relationship' that had developed between the two countries. Their confidence was not, however, shared by their Fretilin escorts, nor by the Portuguese television crew, which happened to be in the area at the same time. Both Fretilin leaders and the Portuguese had tried to persuade them to withdraw on the previous day. In order to allay the fears of Fretilin the newsmen prepared and signed a statement absolving the Timorese of any responsibility for their decision to remain and witness the action. And it was certainly action they got: probably within less than an hour of the entry into Balibo of the Indonesian special forces troops, all five were dead, the circumstances of their deaths creating one of the most controversial and bitter episodes in the entire Timor tragedy.

The attack itself came as no surprise to these men. The expectation of an imminent assault was contained in Greg Shackleton's last film recording. From the battlements of the old fort at Balibo which offer a commanding view of the coastal stretches on both sides of the border, they themselves had been able to observe the bustle of Indonesian naval activities in the waters nearby, including the unloading of military equipment. Perhaps a kind of naive spirit of high adventure prevailed among the group, but Shackleton's last interview indicates that there was also a strong sense of commitment to the task of bringing out the truth about the war in Timor. When the newsmen chose to remain behind, they must have expected to be captured, or at least detained by the Indonesians, and to end up behind Indonesian lines. But, given the good relations between Canberra and Jakarta, they no doubt felt assured of an early release.

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9 Van Atta and Toohey. The Timor Papers, Part 2.

Despite persistent official claims that the newsmen's fate remains a mystery, the events on that day have been the subject of extensive research by journalists like Jill Jolliffe and Hamish Macdonald, as well as by the author, and the differences in our conclusions are matters of detail rather than substance. To an extent they reflect time lapses in the interviews, and the rush of events in Balibo on that day. Australian government ministers and officials subsequently persisted in describing the attack as an incident shrouded in confusion. In fact, as we have seen, there is really little mystery about the attack. It was an entirely Indonesian military operation in the sense that the commanders and the combatants were Indonesian. A few Timorese were taken along, but they were used in support roles, with no combat responsibilities. The dominant Indonesian role has been made abundantly clear in the US intelligence agency assessments, subsequently leaked and published in the *National Times* as the *Timor Papers.*

This information was not, however, unavailable to the Australian Government. In fact the sensitive intelligence material on which such reports were based were provided by Australian agencies to their US and British counterparts, under a long-standing intelligence exchange agreement. It can be assumed that almost identical assessments were also available to the Australian government. In effect, the Whitlam Government was not telling truth when it expressed doubts about who was responsible for the attack. In reality, the Government was served by those very same intelligence agencies whose information led the CIA, on 31 October, to describe the operation thus: *'Some 2000 Indonesian regular infantry troops, special forces, marines, and Timorese partisans, launched co-ordinated attacks along the border and captured at least six border towns in Portuguese Timor on October 16'.* [10]

As has been mentioned earlier, the 'Timorese partisans' were hardly part of the combat force. They consisted of about 100 men who came not from the ranks of Fretilin's UDT adversaries, but from Colonel Sugiyanto's guerrilla training camp in West Timor. At least some of them were from East Timor, having months earlier been secretly 'recruited' in the Atsabe area, where the local ruler, Guilherme Gonçalves, was a supporter of integration.[11]

The troops who entered Balibo appear to have been a mixture of *Kopassandha* (special forces) and KKO (naval commandos), perhaps with some soldiers from the Brawidjaja Division. Hamish McDonald has suggested that the force was entirely *Kopassandha*, but several Timorese who were in the village on that day described to the author different styles of head-gear. The invaders came not from the west - the direction of Batugade, as had been anticipated - but from the south-east, preceded by three hours of continuous shelling. The Fretilin garrison, anxious not to be surrounded and cut off from the main body of Timorese forces, hurriedly withdrew, and the Indonesian soldiers streamed into the village.

The newsmen apparently took painstaking steps to advertise their non-combatant and Australian identities to the advance guard of the attacking forces. Greg Shackleton had painted a large 'Australia' sign on the wall of the house where they were staying, and beneath it he sketched a rough, but identifiable, drawing of an Australian flag. As several witnesses have attested, the newsmen also took care to be dressed in unmistakably non-military clothing, and they did not possess any arms. The last Fretilin soldier to withdraw from the village (whose questioning the writer attended in Dili in late October 1975) claimed that the Australians had moved out into the open and that at least one of them, possibly Brian Peters, attempted some filming at that point. The soldier, an orderly named Guido dos Santos, stated that the newsmen had then moved back towards their house, pointing to the signs on the wall, in an obvious attempt to draw the Indonesian soldiers' attention to their identity.

Clearly they did not get their message across. According to this Timorese source, the attackers fired in the direction of the newsmen and he saw one of them fall, apparently after having been hit. The

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[10] Ibid. For an interesting account of this incident, see Hamish McDonald, 'Death at Balibo", National Times, 7 July 1979.

[11] Gonçalves was one of Timor's most autocratic local rulers, who feared the consequences of democratisation under the decolonisation programme. Indonesia appointed him the first Governor of the 27th Province. In recent years, however, he has become a strong critic of integration.

other newsmen then began shouting "Australians!' and feverishly pointed to the signs on the wall. Dos Santos then withdrew. As he ran he claimed that he could still hear the shouting, but then there was some more firing, and the shouting stopped. About ten days later Roger East, another Australian journalist who was himself later to meet a similar fate after the invasion of Dili, interviewed some other Fretilin soldiers, who claimed that they had watched the Australians while retreating from Balibo. This version is not so different from that of dos Santos, but it is rather more detailed. One of these soldiers, Lucas Jeronimo, told East:

"The Australians ran toward their house about 200 metres away. One kept stopping, looking back and pointing his camera. He was a big man..... The Indonesians kept firing. The man with the bald head [Peters] was still filming, then he cried out and fell down. The other Australians were screaming 'Australians, Australians!' with their hands up. The soldiers circled them and made them turn their backs and face the wall of the house. The firing died down and we crawled away through the undergrowth. We heard the Australians screaming and then there was a burst of automatic fire".[12]

Obviously things moved very quickly on that day at Balibo, and it is probable that within much less than an hour all five of the newsmen had been killed, not by 'UDT-Apodeti forces', as Indonesian officials have consistently tried to make Australians believe, but by regular troops of the Indonesian armed forces. Most of this evidence has come not from Fretilin sources, but from other Timorese who were in Balibo only in October, several of them having accompanied the Indonesian troops from West Timor in guide and interpreter functions. A few accounts have also been obtained from the Indonesian side. All in all, there is enough corroborative evidence from these various accounts to enable us to reconstruct a credible picture of the circumstances in which the newsmen met their fate.

It seems that the newsmen were convinced that there was less risk in exposing themselves to the incoming troops than in remaining in the house. Although the area was shelled before the troops arrived it seems that their entry was not contested by the small Fretilin force, who retreated as they approached (after having made a last attempt to get the newsmen to go with them). In short Balibo fell without much fighting.

When the Indonesian forces moved into the village the newsmen at first came out into the open in an attempt to establish their non-combatant identities. Peters evidently decided to do some filming, in the circumstances an unwise move. The Indonesian troops opened fire and he was hit. When this firing began another member of the group tried to make a run for it, but he was shot down before he got very far. The troops then closed in on the remaining newsmen who, by shouting 'Australians' and pointing to the markings on the wall, made a desperate bid to save their lives. One of them appears to have been struck with a knife - perhaps this caused the screaming that the Fretilin soldiers claimed to have heard during their retreat from the village. In the event, at least three of the surviving members of the party were shot after capture, perhaps within half an hour, and four of the bodies, presumably excluding the body of the journalist who had tried to run away, were taken into the house. It appears that one of the group was still alive. A Timorese who was present on that day later apparently told his brother that the newsman was badly wounded, but that he was wearing headphones and had something like a radio strapped on his back. He said that the newsman 'appeared to be almost dead - near unconsciousness - and was talking into the radio'. This could easily have been Tony Stewart, the soundman, vainly attempting to record something of that terrible incident. According to another source interviewed by the writer, a Timorese moved towards the wounded man, but was ordered back by an Indonesian marine lieutenant, who then shot the newsman. The accounts of the killings contained in Hamish Macdonald's article differ somewhat, but not substantially. [13] The killing by knifing and the vain attempt by one of the group to escape, have surfaced in an number of accounts.

The killing of the journalists was reported by radio to operational headquarters at Batugade, thence to Udayana Kodam headquarters at Den Pasar in Bali,[14] and to Jakarta, probably to Murdani. Colonel

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[12] *Australian*, 10 November 1975.

[13] See *Death at Balibo*, pp. 26-29, National Times, July 7, 1979.

[14] The regional military command of which Timor forms part has its headquarters in Bali, and covers the Nusatenggara Archipelago (Lesser Sundas).

Dading and Louis Taolin then at once flew to Balibo by helicopter, arriving at about 7.15 a.m., possibly before the last of the newsmen was killed. [15] Their visit was followed by a bizarre sequel to this wanton killing. Two or three of the bodies were taken out of the house, and dressed in Portuguese uniforms, of the kind used by Fretilin, which had been discovered among the stores in the local barracks. The corpses were then propped up behind some captured machine-guns in front of the 'Australia' sign. An Indonesian soldier proceeded to photograph the scene. Accounts of this macabre incident have come from a number of sources, and there can be no doubt of its veracity. One Timorese had been ordered to help remove the bodies, and he noticed that, although the corpses had severe wounds, the uniforms in which they were clad were unmarked. This particular incident has been recounted on several occasions, and must be considered credible.[16]

Another source interviewed by the author in 1977, who had served in the Portuguese army, said that he had been ordered by the Indonesians to put into working order the weapons that had been placed in front of the bodies. He had spent an entire day on this task, but had not been successful because key parts of the weapons were missing. A former senior UDT leader also related this incident. He said that although he had not been there at the time, an Indonesian Bakin officer had later shown him the photographs of the bodies of the dead journalists behind automatic weapons. Bakin, he was told, intended to make use of these photographs and the weapons to show that the newsmen had violated their non-combatant status by taking up arms on behalf of Fretilin. The attacking forces would then be absolved of responsibility for their deaths.

However, for reasons that are unclear, the Indonesians did not present this sordid disinformation to Australian investigators. Maybe it was used internally, or perhaps it was abandoned because the weapons could not be put into working order. It is also possible that the scheme was dismissed at a higher level as lacking credibility. Yet there are some grounds for believing that it was more than the whim of a junior intelligence officer. The hoax was set up shortly after Colonel Dading Kalbuadi had arrived at the scene, suggesting that the order to arrange the deception may have come from the operation commander, or was at least approved by him. It is interesting to note that although this hoax was not used at the time, it was subsequently given some publicity, by no less than the late Sir Keith Shann, a former senior public servant and ambassador to, among others, Indonesia. Shann remarked in 1981, after a visit to Indonesia, that he understood that the journalists had been dressed in uniforms when their bodies were discovered. However, the last photographs taken of the victims, and the evidence of Timorese witnesses, make it clear that at no stage did they don uniforms of any kind.

But let us return to events in Balibo. Later in the day the bodies were taken to another house where, together with some other bodies, they were burnt after having been immersed in petrol. According to one of Macdonald's informants a grenade may have been thrown at the bodies after they had been burnt. This provided the setting for a story that was to emerge from sources in Jakarta, that the newsmen had been killed in a rocket attack by UDT-Apodeti forces! It would also explain why the remains handed over to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta weeks later consisted of no more than bone fragments.

Before the bodies were incinerated, however, some of their possessions were looted, including their jeans, cameras and watches. Not all of the looting was carried out by the Indonesians. Joao Tavares, a Timorese - one of the few ex-UDT members to cast his lot with the pro-integration faction - was said to have souvenired a watch from one of the dead newsmen and a camera from another.[16]

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[15] This information is based on conversations with Jose Martins, and on the account by Hamish Macdonald, op. cit.

[16] My own information is based on two witnesses, one of whom carried the bodies to the house where their were burnt, and another, a senior UDT official, who had seen the photographs. According to Macdonald the description of the Indonesian journalist who took the photographs fitted that of Djumaryo, a well-known photographer for the ABRI newspaper, *Berita Yudha*, who, he claims, was involved in the Timor campaign.

[16] For his support Tavares was appointed *bupati* (Resident)of the Maliana regency.

There is now considerable evidence that the Indonesian force which entered Balibo on that day summarily executed the journalists, to use the *Amnesty International* term, or at least three of them, if we assume that one was killed while trying to make a run for it, while another may have died of wounds he received when he tried to film the invaders as they entered the village. There can be no doubt however that the newsmen were not killed in the heat of battle - nor in cross-fire as some Indonesian sources claimed at the time. For one thing, from most accounts, when the ABRI troops entered the village Fretilin had withdrawn, so their entry was not in fact contested. It means that there was no need whatever for the invaders to open fire on the newsmen. Moreover, it is simply inconceivable that they were taken to be comrades-in-arms of Fretilin. All the credible evidence points to the fact that the newsmen did their utmost to advertise their non-combatant status, and there could have been no doubt about their identity in the minds of the Indonesians who killed the remaining three.

It is difficult to believe that the Indonesians did not know that there were Australian journalists in the area. Timorese then in the refugee camps in Indonesian Timor later told the writer that even they were aware of the presence of the television crews in the Balibo area on the eve of the attack. As for the Indonesian military, one need only turn to the account by Hamish McDonald, who reported that there were two Timorese radio operators in Colonel Hernoto's communications centre, for the specific purpose of monitoring Fretilin broadcasts.[17] And Dili Radio, as well as military communications, extensively reported the visit of the newsmen, whose findings, they hoped, would lead to international intervention on their behalf.

Furthermore, the Indonesians were well aware that there were a number of foreigners, including journalists as well as aid workers, in East Timor whose neutral status commanded respect. Only a week or so before the Balibo attack other journalists from the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Reuters, and AAP had visited the border area and their extensive reporting on the situation would not have escaped the attention of Murtopo and Murdani, who were closely monitoring outside interest in the situation in East Timor.

Despite these facts, and intelligence from communications monitoring, it was some time before Australian Government spokesmen dispensed with the explanation that Shackleton, Rennie and their crews were the victims of an accident or misunderstanding. On the basis of evidence that has been around for some years, the most probable reason for the killing was not mistaken identity, but a deliberate decision to remove the risk of exposure of Indonesia's covert military intervention by the international media. Hamish McDonald later wrote that, although Indonesian special forces troops involved in the operation denied any prior knowledge of the television crews at Balibo, they did admit that, in any case, 'the attacking force was under explicit orders to kill all witnesses to their covert intrusion into foreign territory'.[18]

The reaction of the Australian government and its diplomats to the wanton killing of five members of the nation's press corps was consistent with the other aspects of its dismal record in relation to the annexation of East Timor. What is particularly disturbing is that the Whitlam Government knew about the impending attack some days before it took place, as has already been pointed out. The writer was warned about it by a sensitively placed senior official before he left for Timor with the ACFOA team on 13 October. Five days earlier, US intelligence analysts, using information to which Australia also not only had access, but had probably itself supplied from its communications intelligence sources, advised their government that the attack would be launched in a few days. And if we assume that the information came from Australian sources, it is likely that it was available to Whitlam Government officials even earlier.[19] Hamish McDonald wrote: *'According to sources in Jakarta interviewed by this writer, the Australian Embassy was told of plans to attack Balibo two or three days before they were carried out. Almost certainly this information would have been passed on to Canberra.*

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[17] McDonald, *Death at Balibo.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] This comment is based on the experience of the author who, years earlier, had worked as an analyst of sensitive source material in the Defence Department.

Thus, the government had at its disposal enough information - and enough time - to warn Australians in East Timor of the impending risks at the border. Perhaps of even greater importance, they could have advised the Indonesians of the presence of journalists in the area, and stressed that they should be afforded protection appropriate to their non-combatant status.

It might of course have been difficult to warn the newsmen themselves, who may already have been on their way to Timor when the government became aware of Indonesian plans to attack Maliana and Balibo. But as Australian authorities already knew about the Indonesian operation against Batugade, they must surely have concluded that further military operations were to come. Some officials later claimed that they knew nothing of the newsmen's plans to visit the border area. It is hard to credit such a claim: their arrival in East Timor was common knowledge to a number of Australian officials, including the author who had conveyed this information to the relevant desk of the Department of Foreign Affairs. In any case, given the stated purpose of their visit it was inevitable that they would proceed to the border. The main reason for sending the television crews in the first place was to establish whether the Indonesian military were behind the fighting at the border, as Fretilin officials had alleged.

Perhaps government officials knew too little about the situation on the ground in East Timor itself. Indeed, it was the writer's distinct impression at the time that some of the key officials in the relevant policy area of the Department of Foreign Affairs felt that the less they knew about what was happening in the colony, the easier it was for them to cope with the contradictory aspects of Mr Whitlam's Timor policy.

The tragic outcome at Balibo led some officials later to declare that the teams should not have ventured into such a dangerous situation in the first place. It was also alleged that the newsmen had rushed off to the colony without first seeking a brief from the Department of Foreign Affairs, and without even informing Australian authorities of what they were planning to do. There is an element of hypocrisy about such criticisms, which come mostly from officials sources. The Whitlam Government's devious handling of the Timor problem, the contradictory reports coming from Jakarta and the territory, and the reported dangers being faced not just by a small neighbour, but by people who had rallied to Australia's cause during World War II, surely presented the media of this country with an obligation to expose the truth of the situation to the Australian public. Not only had the Timorese for some time been appealing to Australia for help; there was widespread public disquiet at what seemed to be happening in the Portuguese colony, and serious doubts as to whether the government was reacting responsibly to the crisis.

Perhaps the teams should have sought a briefing from government sources, but this begs the question: just what kind of a briefing would they have been given from officials who were keen to keep Australia out of the crisis at that time? In the circumstances it is unlikely that they would have been provided with a frank background assessment. If officials had spoken frankly about what was transpiring, the frailty of the Whitlam government's Timor policy would almost certainly have been compromised. Also, Gerald Stone and others might have feared, from their earlier experiences, that the government would have merely tried to persuade them not to go, and therefore, to have consulted officials beforehand would have meant providing the latter with an opportunity to obstruct the venture. A major policy statement in a confidential cable from Dick Woolcott, Australia's influential Ambassador to Indonesia, suggests that Stone's fears were justified. Woolcott urged what was in fact to become the Whitlam Government's policy. He proposed that the Government should "*leave events take their course; and if and when Indonesia does intervene, act in a way which would be designed to minimise the public impact in Australia and show privately understanding of our policy, and Indonesia's.*[20]

Whatever the circumstances of the newsmen's departure from Australia, it is indeed a weak argument to suggest that government actions to protect its own correspondents should have been contingent on such formalities as prior consultation. In any case, there were already Australian journalists in Timor,

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[20] See Munster and Walsh: Documents on Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1968-75, p.199.

including Tony Menatti of the ABC, and Rick Collins and Jill Jolliffe of AAP-Reuter, who had already ventured to the border area. Did the Australian embassy in Jakarta seek assurances from the Indonesian military that aid workers and journalists would be accorded protection appropriate to their status? There is no evidence of any Australian, British or New Zealand diplomatic pressure on the Indonesian authorities to afford appropriate protection to their citizens.

Notwithstanding the public fiction of the 'civil war' in Timor, frank informal exchanges were going on in Jakarta at that time between Australian Embassy officials and representatives of the Indonesian military establishment, with especially frank briefings on the Timor situation being provided to the military and intelligence representatives on the staff of the embassy. Apparently the Department of Foreign Affairs did make an effort to pass on a warning to journalists in Dili, although it came rather late. According to Jill Jolliffe: '*on the Thursday on which the journalists perished, the head of AAP's Darwin bureau telephoned the Dili correspondent with the information that Foreign Affairs had warned that "something big" was about to happen in East Timor on that day and that the Dili correspondent should be alerted*'. [21] As Jolliffe herself pointed out, the 'something big' had already happened that very morning - the newsmen at the border had by that time been dead for about four hours!

Although the official reaction in Australia to reports that the newsmen were missing and may have been killed was slow and extremely cautious, it has been credibly reported that within less than 24 hours the government knew that the crews had been killed in an Indonesian military operation. This information apparently came from Australia's communications intelligence operation, one of the nation's most closely guarded secrets. A unit operated at Shoal Bay, near Darwin as part of the Defence Signals Division is reported to have conveyed information that the newsmen had been killed to relevant government officials by the evening of that same day. The role of DSD in this particular incident has already been analysed by Richard Hall, Desmond Ball, and Hamish McDonald. [22] Perhaps the most interesting account comes from the pen of McDonald, who wrote:

"After monitoring the battle for Balibo as it happened - through a mass of signals that detailed the movements of small units, ships and aircraft - the Shoal Bay DSD station sent recorded data immediately to DSD headquarters in Melbourne, almost next door to the HSV7 studios in St Kilda Road".

That afternoon the analysed material went to the Defence Department's Joint Intelligence Organisation in Canberra. Early in the evening a senior Defence Department official took a report over to Parliament House to Defence Minister Bill Morrison. This was only 12 hours after the attack.

Morrison circulated the report to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Foreign Minister Don Willesee. But none of the ALP ministers were in a mood to look closely at the report. That day Opposition Leader Malcolm Fraser had announced that, because of the loans affair, the Opposition would block Supply in the Senate.

Perhaps helped by the general crisis, the permanent head of the Defence Department, Sir Arthur Tange, argued successfully to Morrison against revealing what had been learnt about Balibo [23]

As McDonald goes on to point out, the reasoning behind this decision appears to have been that the use of this information would '*reveal to the Indonesians the level of signals that could be intercepted and invite them to take counter-measures*'.[24] The government -or at least those members of it with access to the highly sensitive code-word material - seems to have made the extraordinary decision to delete from their minds any knowledge of the intercepted material. In effect this meant that its subsequent approach to the problem of the 'missing' newsmen was utterly contradictory. Ministers and

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[21] Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p.233.

[22] See Richard Hall, *The Secret State* (Sydney: Cassell, 1978), pp.149-150; Desmond Ball, *A Suitable Piece of Real Estate* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1980); McDonald, 'Death at Balibo'.

[23] McDonald, ibid.

[24] Ibid.

their advisers were thus to continue to be sceptical and questioning towards allegations which it knew to be absolutely true! So deeply rooted has this deception become in Australian foreign policy that since that time no amount of corroborative evidence has succeeded in bringing government officials and ministers to acknowledge publicly the basic fact that the newsmen had been killed in an essentially Indonesian military operation.

The decision to ignore the DSD material in order not to risk compromising the source of the information is by no means without precedent. Similar decisions were made during World War 2 in order to conceal the fact that important German codes had been broken. But in the case of the Balibo tragedy, the implications of the decision were somewhat wider, and the reasoning perhaps naive. The fact that these encoded messages were vulnerable to modern crypt-analysis methods, with which Australians were familiar, would have come as no surprise to Indonesian communications experts who in any case were eventually to learn that at least some of their military cipher traffic had been compromised during the Timor operation.

What is of even greater significance is the fact that by not making use of information, which Indonesian intelligence almost certainly presumed to have been compromised, the Whitlam government implicitly conveyed to the Indonesian generals in Jakarta the clear impression that their moves to annex East Timor were not going to be challenged. That the Australian government was not going to be provoked, even by the killing of the five newsmen, must have seemed incomprehensible to the Indonesians, and in Jakarta would have been interpreted as virtual support for the seizure of East Timor by armed force.

But the few government ministers (perhaps only two), and a handful of their Foreign Affairs and Defence advisers, were not the only persons to have disclosed to them that the Indonesians had killed the journalists. Only one day after the Balibo attack John Kerin, at the time secretary of the ALP's Caucus Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and a critic of Whitlam's Timor policy (who was later to become a senior minister in the Hawke Government), was telephoned by an anonymous caller - evidently a troubled intelligence officer - and provided with details of the killing at Balibo, and the name of the officer in charge. A similar approach, in the form of a letter, was made to Senator Arthur Gietzelt, another active opponent of Whitlam's Timor policy.

One of the most interesting disclosures was made to John Foell, a Channel Nine executive, who had been sent to Darwin to seek further information. According to McDonald, Foell was called to the Travelogue lobby and told by a nervous stranger that the newsmen had been 'machine-gunned and their bodies burnt'. [25] It was a case, it seemed, of the troubled consciences of a few intelligence officials outweighing the force of their security pledges.

The Aftermath of Balibo

The official Australian response to the killing of the television crews fell not far short of total inaction. In their attitudes to the incident most Foreign Affairs officials were defensive, some resorting to criticising the journalists for having gone to Balibo in the first place. Clearly this was the Woolcott prescription; Australians should have stayed away from Timor and let the Indonesians resolve the problem in their own way, that is, 'let events take their course'. Those who did not comply with this rule of good sense and discretion could not blame the authorities in Australia, and nor could they expect any quarter from the Indonesians, whose disregard of fundamental international rules of behaviour needed to be judged against Jakarta's fears that the nation's legitimate security interests were under threat.

Many of the Foreign Affairs officials involved in the day-to-day conduct of the Timor policy seemed untroubled by the moral, or for that matter long term political, implications of Indonesia's creeping military intervention. Indeed, ALP parliamentarians like John Kerin referred to officials such as the head of the South-east Asia Division and the head of the branch dealing with Indonesia - and Timor - as a kind of 'Indonesia Lobby'. Some of the reasons behind such attitudes have already been discussed.

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[25] Ibid.

But they are also rooted to a large extent in the professional moulding of a diplomat in that socially incestuous and elitist community..

When the Timor crisis began to unfold, the Indonesia Desk was responsible for the Australian policy-formulating response. In that context the Timor question became a small side-show, a potential irritant that threatened an infinitely more important relationship, that between Jakarta and Canberra. For most officials involved, therefore, the Indonesian response deserved much more attention and understanding than the right to self-determination of the Timorese. There was a lack of both understanding of, and sympathy for the situation in the Portuguese colony, to which few officials had ever ventured and which years earlier had been dismissed by the pragmatists as having little strategic or economic importance to Australia.

Thus, a kind of consensus of sceptical disinterest and detachment prevailed among those actors who shaped Australia's policy on the question. The underlying prejudices enabled the officials concerned, without qualms, to embark on a policy of systematic deception of the Australian public, and, to some extent, of the Parliament. Whatever the constraints on the use of 'sensitive source material', there was sufficient collateral evidence for the government and its officials to make known the nature of Indonesian intentions and even their subversive activities.

When the attack on Balibo took place the Government and its officials were virtually carrying out a policy of deception, which itself would have been exposed if they had admitted what they knew of the killing of the newsmen, and the circumstance in which the incident had occurred. Yet, as we shall see, official spokesmen consistently chose to cast doubt on new evidence of Indonesian involvement, although they must have known it to be accurate, in a vain attempt to protect a 'special' relationship with Jakarta, a relationship already devoid of mutual respect, and of any special attributes. This was one area of government policy that did not change when Whitlam was replaced by Malcolm Fraser as Prime Minister.

Government officials went through the motions of investigating the deaths of the newsmen, but their investigations were essentially superficial, and probably frustrating for the officials concerned. Inevitably the results accomplished nothing, merely casting further doubts on the government's credibility. A Third Secretary of the Australian embassy in Jakarta, Richard Johnson, arrived in Kupang six days after the killing and, although he was to spend almost three weeks in Indonesian Timor, not once was he able to venture near the frontier, let alone to Balibo. The frustrating of the young diplomat's mission was said to have been in retaliation for the anti-Indonesian demonstrations that had occurred in Australia in the wake of the Balibo attack.

Meanwhile, the pro-integration UDT leader, Lopes da Cruz, was reported in the Jakarta daily, *Kompas*, on 17 October 1975, as having claimed to have discovered the bodies of four Europeans at Balibo near a sign marked 'Australia', a report he was later to deny. However, a week after this report, Mr Johnson received in Kupang some letters from the anti-Fretilin parties. one of these documents was a statement signed by Lopes da Cruz, Guilherme Goncalves and Jose Martins - respectively the leaders of UDT, Apodeti and Kota - which declared that when the forces of UDT and Apodeti had attacked Balibo heavy fire had been directed at a house from which ' a counter-attack had been launched', and when the forces arrived at the scene fifteen bodies were found there, 'among them some white people'. These could be the journalists, the letter said. This account, which was virtually dictated to the Timorese who signed the statement, was to form part of the official Indonesian version of the attack. [26] In essence, no Indonesians were involved and the assault was led by Tomas Goncalves (Guilherme's son), Joao Tavares and Andreas da Costa. The next major development was on 12 November, when General Yoga Sugama handed over charred human remains, some notebooks, papers and camera equipment, which had, for miraculous reasons that the general did not bother to explain, escaped being damaged by the fire that had incinerated the newsmen.

Meanwhile, in Australia pressure was mounting on the Whitlam government in what were to be its last weeks in office. A few days after Balibo - and after the sighting of the DSD-intercepted material -

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[26] Based on interviews with former UDT leaders in Portugal, in 1977.

Prime Minister Whitlam and Foreign Minister Don Willesee reported to Parliament that the journalists were 'missing' at 'the scene of heavy fighting between rival factions on Thursday and Friday of last week'. [27] On 29 October the Foreign Minister, who had also been acquainted with the truth behind the attack, was still to persist with the line that no 'definitive information' had 'yet come to hand'. He did mention the account of a Fretilin soldier interviewed in Dili who had 'described the entry of the anti-Fretilin forces into Balibo'.

However, to be fair to Don Willesee, who had never been at ease with Mr Whitlam's Timor policy, the deepening Indonesian involvement at Balibo and the killing of the journalists profoundly disturbed him. The Minister not only had information from the decoded intercepted telegrams; he also received a report from the author, then head of the ACFOA mission in Timor, about the Balibo attack, the extent of Indonesian military involvement, and the risk of serious humanitarian consequences if it were not stopped. This message was sent in the aftermath of Balibo with a plea to the Whitlam Government to use its good offices to persuade Indonesia to pursue its objectives by other means.

Faced with mounting public anger towards Indonesia, and impatience with the government's apparently weak response, on 30 October Willesee delivered a major statement in the Senate in which he declared that his government had 'viewed with concern widespread reports that Indonesia is involved in military intervention in Portuguese Timor', and urged that 'a solution to the problems in Portuguese Timor should be sought through peaceful means and free of external intervention'.[28] This was the Whitlam government's only major statement to cast some doubt on Indonesia's role in the territory.

As it was, the original statement, to Willesee's annoyance, was toned down in response to an intervention by Mr Woolcott who declared that, in its original form, it would merely serve to *'stimulate hostility to Indonesia within the Australian community, which it has been our policy to minimise'*. Significantly, Woolcott went on to say: *'Although we know it is not true, the formal position of the Indonesian government is still that there is no Indonesian military intervention in East Timor. If the Minister said or implied in public the Indonesian Government was lying we could invite a hurt and angry reaction'*.[29]

Early in November the Indonesian government evidently began to take stock of the impact the Balibo affair was having on its image in Australia and elsewhere. The existence of tensions was reportedly conveyed to the President himself by Foreign Minister Adam Malik on 5 November. But still the Whitlam government apparently could not bring itself to make a formal protest to Indonesia. More than two weeks were to elapse after the killing before Prime Minister Whitlam despatched a mildly worded letter to the Indonesian President via the retiring Indonesian ambassador. In the circumstances it was an extraordinary document, in which Mr Whitlam expressed his government's anxiety about the missing newsmen, and sought the President's co-operation in determining their fate. However, the letter was delivered two days after Whitlam's commission had been withdrawn by the Governor-General, and, apparently, no reply was ever sent. A few weeks later on 5 December, a simple funeral service was held for the newsmen in a cemetery in Jakarta, with a wreath from the embassy and a card which read: "*They stayed because they saw the search for truth and the need to report at first hand as a necessary task*'.

The problem of the missing newsmen was inherited by the Fraser government, which chose to continue to deal with the problem in a similar manner. However, Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock's visit to Jakarta in April 1976 resulted in an agreement for an Australian on-the-spot investigation. A group of three diplomats from the embassy in Jakarta thus set out for Timor in what turned out to be a farce; a rather futile and naive attempt to clear up the matter by conducting an investigation at Balibo itself. It was an extraordinary venture which was clearly designed to appease continuing public concern at the killings. In reality, the team was investigating a situation, the outcome of which it already knew. Did anyone really believe that the Indonesian military in East Timor would cooperate

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[27] Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 21 October 1975.
[28] Ibid, Senate, 30 October 1975.
[29] As reported by Bruce Juddery, *Canberra Times*, 31 May 1976.

with the Australian team to the extent of disclosing how the attack was really carried out, and allow the interviewing of genuine witnesses?

As it turned out, the scenario was carefully stage-managed for the benefit of this investigation, perhaps on the assumption that the members of the team privately shared the Indonesian desire to dispose of this messy incident as quickly as possible and would not, in the event probe beyond the 'evidence' arranged for their perusal. In this way Australian honour could be satisfied. With growing concern, especially in Washington, at the state of Australia-Indonesian relations the reasons for Jakarta's readiness to agree to this kind of enquiry were clear enough. It took little effort to ensure that the mission spoke to the right people and did not stumble across any incriminating evidence.

What is less clear is why the Australian Foreign Minister agreed to an arrangement the results of which would do nothing to satisfy the Australian public. It would merely aggravate suspicions, and add to criticisms of Australia's accommodating role. Indeed, it was tempting to conclude that the Fraser government cynically agreed to this futile exercise in a deliberate attempt to dispose of an obstacle to its stated aim of normalising relations between Jakarta and Canberra. The enquiry was in fact one of the earliest steps by the Fraser government, as the Prime Minister was later to put it, to put the Timor problem behind it, and look to the future.

On 28 April 1976, the Australian embassy team arrived at Kupang, which they used as their base, travelling by helicopter to East Timor. Although in their report they stated that the team had relied on, and received, the co-operation of the authorities in East Timor and in Indonesia for access to East Timor and transport, in fact during the twelve days they spent on the island in connection with this mission, they made only two relatively brief visits to Balibo, where the information from which their findings were derived was obtained. The team merely went through the motions of a thorough investigation. It reported in detail on the damage to individual houses, including of course the house in which the burnt bodies were alleged to have been discovered, according to Timorese leaders they met, who claimed to have led the anti-Fretilin forces attack on the village.

The Australian team's Indonesian hosts were obviously well prepared for their coming. According to an Indonesian official who had been connected with the operation, and to Timorese who were in Balibo at that time and were interviewed by the author some eight months later in refugee camps, village residents, among them junior officials (who had been in Balibo at about the time of the killing), were ordered to move out of the village. According to these sources most of the Timorese whom the Australian team saw were in reality Indonesian soldiers, specially selected from among the troops originating from neighbouring islands where the people resemble the Quemac of the Balibo-Maliana area. It is apparent from the team's report that the Timorese whom they questioned were a very carefully selected group. Lopes da Cruz, Guilherme Goncalves and his son had long been trusted agents of *Operasi Komodo*, while Joao Tavares (misspelt in the report) was a more recent recruit to the Indonesian cause - an official who was far from popular even among non-Fretilin Timorese. In practice, these were the leading collaborators, the front men of *Operasi Komodo*, as their later careers were to show. Guilherme Goncalves was later to be appointed governor of the '27th Province', Lopes da Cruz became the Province's vice-governor, while Tavares was appointed *bupati* (senior district administrator) of the Maliana-Balibo area. The manipulation of the investigation was later to attract this comment from Hamish McDonald:

"What the team saw had, of course, been thoroughly filtered, rehearsed and directed by senior Indonesian military officers who stayed just off-stage 18 miles away in Indonesian Timor at Atambua".[30] *A similar account was later provided to the author by a senior Indonesian official.*

It seems incredible that the members of the Australian team were not aware that their reception and the testimony they received were being orchestrated by an Indonesian intelligence operation. Presumably at least the leader, the political counsellor, Alan Taylor (now Australian Ambassador to Indonesia) had been informed of what had really transpired at Balibo through the 'sensitive source material'. If this was the case, the team's report, which was in due course tabled in the Australian

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[30] McDonald, *Death at Balibo.*

Parliament, is an intriguing document. In effect, the representatives of a government which had long known that the attack on Balibo had been an Indonesian operation, with the Indonesian military command therefore being responsible for the killing of the newsmen, concluded that the disinformation supplied by Lopes da Cruz and his colleagues, *'while vague on several important points, had a certain plausibility'*. The report states blandly: *'Persons to whom the team spoke had not known that there were Australians in Balibo at the time of the attack and had assumed that all persons in the town at that time were Fretilin supporters'*. [31]

Surely, the report should have at least read 'claimed not to have known'. Indeed, it contains no suggestion that all was not fair and square. The curious comment in the body of the report on the bush land around Balibo - 'there was no evidence of damage to the trees or flora as a result of heavy shelling' - seemed designed to cast doubt on the already well established evidence that the Indonesians had shelled Balibo from land and sea before the attack. It was a somewhat gratuitous comment, because seven months later (after a monsoon season) there would hardly have been much evidence left of shelling. Balibo was not Vietnam - the shelling would not have been of such intensity as to inflict permanent scars on the bush land outside the town. Not surprisingly, the report was greeted with considerable scepticism in the Parliament. On the other hand of course, it was probably a matter of pride and satisfaction to the principals of *Operasi Komodo*.

Based on this inconclusive outcome of its investigation, the Fraser government seemed determined to take no further investigative action in connection with the Balibo killings. New information from Timorese who claimed to have been in Balibo on 16 October, which was made public by the writer and John Dowd, at the time president of the Australian Chapter of the International Commission of Jurists, was to be subjected to a much more critical examination by the Department of Foreign Affairs than the testimony provided to the team that went to Balibo. In reporting the interviews he had conducted, the writer urged the Foreign Affairs Department to investigate these sources itself. The report stated:

"The refugee accounts of what happened at Balibo suggest that at least some of the journalists may have been killed deliberately by Indonesian soldiers. These accounts, though by no means conclusive, are on the whole consistent and they seem to open up new avenues of inquiry. The refugees' accounts seem conclusive in one respect: it is surely inconceivable that the attack on Balibo was other than an Indonesian military operation, and the fact that responsibility for the consequences of this operation rests with the Indonesian military command in Timor would thus seem beyond doubt". [32]

Further interviews were later to be conducted by John Dowd, a NSW Liberal leader. John Penlington, then head of the ABC's London Bureau, went to Portugal and recorded accounts from the refugees which were, generally speaking, corroborative. Later Jill Jolliffe collected accounts from the refugees in even greater detail. But the government seemed resolved not to be lured into reopening a case that it had been at such pains to dispose of, in an obvious attempt to avert further problems in its uneasy relationship with its giant Asian neighbour.

In answers to Parliamentary questions ministers declared that they did not feel that the new information opened any further useful avenues for investigation. In one of these answers, however, the government was also obliged to admit that it had not itself carried out any investigations among refugees from the Balibo district of East Timor and, furthermore, that it had no intention of doing so. Indeed, there was a touch of finality in the official response to the enquiries of Hamish McDonald in July 1979. He was told by the Department of Foreign Affairs that it believed that its enquiries, 'which were vigorously and persistently pursued, have been as thorough as possible in the circumstances'. One subterfuge resorted to by the Fraser government was the claim that some of the families of the newsmen had asked that the matter not be pursued any further. In fact, according to the writer's enquiries such a statement had been made by only one of the victims' relatives, while other relatives

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[31] Report of the Visit to East Timor by the Investigation Team from the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, April/May, 1976.

[32] J.S.Dunn, *The East Timor Situation*, Report on talks with Timorese refugees in Portugal, February 1977.

were still keen to establish the truth of this tragic incident. Finally, McDonald was told that the government believed that 'the point has been reached where little is to be gained by attempting to mount further enquiries into the matter'.[33]

No other incident has so exposed Australia's lack of commitment, conscience and resolve, in relation to the annexation of East Timor, as has done its response to the fateful incident at Balibo on 16 October 1975. For the government of the time it seemed to be a point of no return. After Balibo first the Whitlam Government, and later the Fraser government virtually connived with the Suharto regime in an attempt to head off public reaction to the armed aggression against the Timorese - as Woolcott had recommended. The killing of the newsmen was undoubtedly the worst and the most wanton act of its kind in the history of Australian journalism, and yet, incredibly, it evoked not a word of formal protest to Indonesia. On the contrary, having concealed the facts in the first place, Australian ministers have at times tried to discredit new sources of information, which they must have known to be true. The concealment that took place before the newsmen went to Timor probably contributed to their deaths. And subsequent remarks that they should not have been there have tended to cast a shadow of dishonour on their motives. In this way an act of courage, determination and commitment has been denied appropriate official and public recognition. The newsmen may have been somewhat imprudent, but, from their reports and from the accounts of those who knew them, there can be no doubt as to their sincerity in seeking to bring to the Australian public the truth about a situation in which Australia's role was quite shameful. To expose such a situation is surely one of the noblest challenges before today's media, a role which highlights the media's central place in a functioning democracy.

To judge the significance of the Balibo incident, we need only consider what would have been the outcome had the newsmen survived. If they had succeeded in getting out of East Timor with their irrefutable evidence of Indonesia's deepening military intervention against Fretilin, the public exposure of this situation could well have changed the whole course of events for the Timorese. The filming of the Dili massacre and other international incidents like Tienanmen and the killings in Sarajevo, are reminders of how media coverage can shape public opinion, and force governments into responsible action. Such a public reaction in Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the US back in 1975 might conceivably have led to real diplomatic pressure being brought to bear on Indonesia, persuading President Suharto, who had after all only reluctantly agreed to allow the military operation, to call it off.

The Balibo incident was thus a key event in the unfolding of one of the most serious acts of aggression since the United Nations was established half a century ago. It foreshadowed a long process of subjugation and oppression which, in the five years following the invasion cost more than 150,000 Timorese lives. It also cost them their right to self-determination, their right to shape their own national identity and destiny. In a sense, the story of Balibo is symptomatic of the entire Timor drama.

The five newsmen slain at Balibo were only the first victims of a gross violation of the basic rules of protection of non-combatants, be they media or the population at large. The Western response to the incident, especially that of Australia but including nations like New Zealand, Britain and the United States, removed any reluctance on the part of the Suharto regime to proceed with a military operation that inflicted enormous humanitarian costs. Our failure to react appropriately to the Balibo killings and, later, to the invasion of Dili, in effect stiffened ABRI's resolve to ignore international protests, not to speak of the pleas of the Timorese themselves. Thanks to the failure of the Western conscience 20 years ago the people of East Timor have been consigned to a new format of colonial domination, a system of rule more oppressive, and infinitely more culturally destructive, than the form of colonialism endured by them in the last decades of Portuguese colonial rule.

James Dunn

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[33] McDonald, *Death at Balibo.*